

# 'Caucasus'

## *Some Thoughts on the Recent Conflict between Russia and Georgia*

### **Introduction**

When I saw the first reports of the Georgian attack on South Ossetia in early August 2008, my heart, like those of many, sank. To me it seemed like a typical Caucasian response to a typical Caucasian problem, one that has been perpetuated through centuries of internecine and interreligious conflict in the region.

And for those familiar with the tragic history of Caucasian rivalries, Georgia's attack seemed like a response that, far from solving the problem, would merely entrench existing animosities. But for the conflicting tectonic plates of geopolitics in the region - and its oil wealth - the consequences of this latest flare-up, though severe, would most likely have been local.



The Caucasus boasts some of the most beautiful mountain scenery in the world, pictures of which present an image of a sublime tranquility, as well as a rich variety of flora and fauna. The reality among its peoples, however, is very different. Fiercely independent and largely lawless apart from honour codes, it is partly because of the mountainous terrain, with people-groups living separately from each other, that conflicts have been perpetuated over the centuries. So the interactions of different groups with others is often based on the perception of other groups being potential, and often actual, enemies. Here over 50 ethno-linguistic groups share a relatively small geographical area, as shown by the map. Yet their separation is the most striking, and sadly enduring, fact about their existence.

Hostilities, based on clan loyalties and blood feuds, run very deep. To give examples: the Chechens and Ingush hate each other in equal measure; Dagestan (which borders the Caspian Sea) is broken into a large number of clan groups; and the Ossetians - nominally Christian - who were the only group to fight alongside Russia when it expanded into the Caucasus in the nineteenth century, are hated by just about all their neighbours. The horrific Beslan school siege of September 2004 was one more bloody episode in their sorry recent history. All these fractures and fissures are, sadly, typical of the wider whole. Few people trust the police and the courts; justice in the north Caucasus is very often personal. Add a Russian state that draws sustenance from the fear of encirclement and is increasingly influenced by nationalistic streams of Orthodoxy. Finally, throw in the recent rise of radicalised Islam in the Caucasus (the Chechens and Ingush, are historically Muslim peoples), and you have a potentially explosive cocktail which is always simmering beneath the surface.



*a mountain range in the Caucasus (courtesy of cairngram.com)*

Domination and forced unification has long characterised the policies of the bigger powers in the region. For instance, uniting the Chechens and Ingush in a single republic was the brain-child of none other than Josef Stalin - in the days of the Soviet Union. Stalin, incidentally, was Georgian, hailing from Gori, one of the frontline towns in this recent conflict. And interestingly, last month he was just pipped to the post in a Russian television poll, inviting viewers to nominate the person they saw as the greatest Russian of all time. Stalin therefore epitomises some of the complexities here.

Stalin's policy of forcing unity was a means of keeping the Ingush and Chechens in tension and therefore always reliant on outside intervention from Moscow. It was during the Soviet period also - 1922 to be precise - that North and South Ossetia were split between Russia and Georgia respectively.

From time to time the rivalries and alliances in the Caucasus have caused problems for the bigger powers. For instance, the Abkhaz and Chechens identified with one another in seeking to separate from Georgia and Russia respectively. It's perhaps not surprising that Russia over the last 20 years should have tried to woo the Abkhaz by gradually separating them from Georgian control, thus undermining their alignment with the Chechens. And the Chechens have similarly hailed the Georgians in their stand against Russia.

### ***Caucasian Quagmire***

As with all wars, some facts about this latest flare-up are clear and undisputed; others are less so. What was clear at the beginning was that on the night of August 7<sup>th</sup>, Georgian forces attacked South Ossetia, and in doing so, hundreds of civilians were killed. Not quite the genocide cited by the Russians in justification for their intervention, but certainly indiscriminate and needless loss of life and property for which Georgia must answer beyond saying, 'We had no option.' The destruction included, according to Russian media reports, a church building in which civilians were hiding, and a water treatment works, which threatened to flood the basements in which people were sheltering from the bombs. It is not clear whether civilians were deliberately targeted. But in this attack, and in the subsequent response by Russian and South Ossetian forces, acts appear to have been committed (the burning of Georgian villages in South Ossetia, for instance) which would merit war crimes investigations.

It is even less clear what happened immediately before the Georgian attack on 7<sup>th</sup> August. It seems to have followed weeks of exchanges between Georgian forces and South Ossetian militias. But Russia claims that Georgia attacked hours after signing a ceasefire agreement. Exactly why President Saakashvili ordered his forces in that night is also not clear. The stated aim was to recover what, in Georgian eyes, is Georgian territory and to 'restore constitutional order' in the breakaway region. Saakashvili further claims evidence that Russian forces were already pouring into South Ossetia through the Roki Tunnel (which links the Ossetias), before Georgian forces attacked. At the very least, however, Saakashvili's decision was a mistake. How he thought he would achieve his aim by force is anybody's guess. And if he gambled that Russia would not respond as it did, he was, as we have seen, profoundly mistaken. Even if Russian forces were not crossing the border on the night before Georgia attacked, and even if Russia was caught off guard by the Georgian actions - with the world's attention on the Olympics - it was never likely that Russia would stand on the sidelines.

Historically, ever since Russia expanded into the region in the nineteenth century, it has taken to itself the role of 'guarantor of peace' in the north Caucasus, a role which Prime Minister Vladimir Putin reiterated during the brief war. Indeed, Vladikavkaz, the capital of *North Ossetia* - and Russia's principal town in the region - says it in its name, which means, 'Ruler of the Caucasus.' For good or ill, Russia is the only regional power with the means to impose its will on the warring peoples of the region.

Secondly, Russian peacekeepers have been patrolling South Ossetia and Abkhazia (the other breakaway region of Georgia), ever since a ceasefire agreement was signed to end the last conflict over the two territories in 1992. That flare-up had its roots in the break-up of the Soviet Union, when Georgia broke away as an independent state, and the territories broke away from Georgia. Georgian nationalists, led by the then President Gamzhakhurdia, waged a war against the separatists in which thousands were killed or displaced on both sides. The conflict seemed to pass almost unnoticed in the West while our attention was focused closer to home on the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia.

The peace which followed merely froze the conflict. It was only a matter of time before hostilities were reignited, since frozen conflicts inevitably heat up unless resolved by negotiation. When Mikheil Saakashvili won the presidential election in Georgia in 2003, part of his plank was to re-establish Georgian sovereignty in his breakaway regions, including the tiny southern coastal region of Ajaria. He had already established his form when the latest conflict broke out: Ajaria was recaptured in 2004, when Saakashvili forced its leader, Aslan Abashidze, into exile.

Russia meanwhile, as 'guarantor of peace,' established itself in Abkhazia and South Ossetia. If this was to become a

case of the cuckoo patrolling the nest, as one reporter put it, it seems not to have been apparent to those who signed the original agreement in the early 1990's. In the August 2008 conflict, Russia made much of the fact that it was intervening to protect its citizens, since many of them had been given Russian passports. This served two purposes: firstly to deflect criticism by saying that it was merely protecting its own; secondly to send a chill down the spines of other countries on Russia's fringes with sizeable Russian minorities: 'Watch out, we're no longer weak, and we're on the march again.'

### ***A Script for War***

Where and when the script for the August 2008 conflict was written is difficult to say with certainty. Russia claims to have been pushed into action by the Georgian incursion into South Ossetia. However, a Balkan dynamic seems likely. The independence of Kosovo from Serbia earlier in the year was a stinging slap in the face for Russian diplomacy, since Serbia has historically been a client state of Russia. Russia opposed what it saw as a Western attack on the territorial integrity of Serbia, but was powerless to do anything about it. This was despite landing troops at the airport in Pristina (the Kosovan capital), in 1999, when NATO ground forces moved in following the Serb retreat. When Western countries recognised Kosovo's independence, Russia's then president, Vladimir Putin, warned of serious consequences, and though he didn't mention them by name, the frozen conflicts in Georgia were probably in his mind. The thinking may have been, 'If you can separate Kosovo from Serbia, then we can do the same with Abkhazia and South Ossetia.' In other words, 'If you can intervene to the detriment of one of our client states, then we can do the same to one of yours, ie. Georgia.' The parallels are not exact, however. Kosovo's autonomy within Serbia was squashed in the 1990's, by order of Serbia's then president Slobodan Milosevic, followed by ethnic cleansing of Albanians from the territory in early 1999. Abkhazia and South Ossetia on the other hand, had virtual independence from Georgia all this time, although guaranteed by the presence of Russian troops.

And Russia's claim to be protecting its citizens in this latest conflict rings somewhat hollow when taken alongside its policy on its side of the Caucasian mountains - in Chechnya, particularly. Many thousands of Chechen civilians (themselves Russian citizens) were to die when Russian forces were sent in to quell rebellions there in the 1990's. Nonetheless, Western protestations about the territorial integrity of Georgia (which incidentally Russia supported, at least publicly), seem somewhat weak given the separation of Kosovo from Serbia earlier in the year.

If, as some suspect, the script for the current conflict was written in Moscow (there never has been any love lost between Russia's Vladimir Putin, and Georgia's Mikheil Saakashvili), then it might look something like this: Russia, stung by Kosovo's independence, sets out to stir up trouble for its NATO and EU-aspirant neighbour, Georgia:

1. She begins by encouraging South Ossetian forces to shell Georgian positions inside Georgia proper. (Even if there were no such encouragement, one has to ask why Russian 'peacekeepers' were unable or unwilling to stop the South Ossetian militias attacking Georgian forces.)
2. Georgia responds in kind.
3. The pressure is ratcheted up over the following weeks, till President Saakashvili sees no option but to send his troops in, thus falling right into Putin's trap.

But could it be that Saakashvili was reacting to promises of Western help in his campaign to win back his recalcitrant territories? Accusations of Western encouragement of Georgia have certainly been made by Russian leaders. But one has to ask why the West would encourage Georgia when it could do so little once Russia responded. Consider the divisions in NATO over Georgia's application for membership - hardly a basis for pushing Georgia into a proxy war with its giant neighbour. More likely would be a scenario - given some of his other actions in office - in which Saakashvili opened his attack in the mistaken belief that his Western allies would rush in to help him. Or maybe he was trying to exploit what he saw as a moment of weakness at the beginning of a new presidency in Russia.

### ***A Desire to Control***

This is speculation of course, but already we're seeing the impact on the local situation in the Caucasus of wider power-play, even if its details are somewhat obscure. But why is this? What is driving the policy makers and opinion formers in Russia and the West? The answer, in my view, is fear. And with fear comes the desire to control.

Let's look at the situation first from the Russian perspective. This is perhaps best done by imagining ourselves sitting in Moscow and viewing things from that angle. Whether one looks east, west, or south, Russia is bordered by lots of countries, any of which are potential enemies. This is the perspective from which Russian leaders have over the centuries viewed the world beyond their borders. Quoted in *'The Economist'*, Lilia Shevtsova of the Carnegie Moscow Centre argues that the political system built by Mr Putin requires the twin images of an enemy and a besieged fortress. "This war is not about South Ossetia, Abkhazia or Georgia," she says. "It is about the matrix of the Russian state and its survival. The beast needs feeding."



This is not new. Folk memory - something Western minds struggle to comprehend - runs deep in Russia. Her fear of encirclement probably has its roots as far back as the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century under Chinggis Khan and his sons. This was the only successful conquest of Russia, and Russian appeals to western powers to help hold back the Mongol advance went unheeded. This fear was fed by its constant battles with its neighbours since: Poland, the Grand Duchy of Lithuania, Turkey, then France (under Napoleon), Germany (in two world wars), Japan (in 1905 and the Second World War), and so on. No-one should underestimate the cost to Russia of these conflicts, nor their effect on the national psyche.

This fear of encirclement also draws on Russia's historic position as a landlocked territory at the heart of the Eurasian landmass. (See the map opposite). It was to be nearly two centuries before the Principality of Moscow, as Russia was then (represented by the turquoise blue area on the map), was strong enough to free itself from the Mongol yoke. But even so doing, it was to find itself sandwiched between the growing Duchy of Lithuania, and constant threat of attack from the Mongol / Tatar horde from the south and east.

This was the geo-political context of Russia during the reign of Ivan the Great (or 'Terrible') from 1462-1505. Many developments in Russian statecraft, including the centralised bureaucracy within, its instinctive distrust of foreigners without, and Russia's perpetual 'need' to dominate in order to avoid domination, have their roots in this troubled period in her history.



map from Wikipedia

The fear of encirclement continued throughout the Soviet period. Indeed, the US and Western policy of 'containment' - necessary from one side of the line, merely entrenched this fear on the other. Even in recent times, Russian leaders and others have fed the idea that dark forces and 'spies,' sometimes disguised as missionaries, were or are seeking to break the country up. Such a break-up could so easily have happened during the chaos of the Yeltsin years. Indeed, the bloody break-up of Yugoslavia serves as an object lesson of what could happen on a magnified scale if the same were ever to happen in Russia. The consequences would be too terrible to contemplate, especially when the potential for use of weapons of mass destruction is factored in.

Russia particularly fears Western encroachment on what it regards as its 'near abroad.' During the Cold War, large parts of central and eastern Europe were under Soviet control. But this frontier rolled back dramatically in the early 1990's. Many states threw off the Soviet yoke, starting to look west, rather than east, to fulfil their economic and political aspirations. As a result the large Russian populations of the Baltic countries, and elsewhere, suddenly found themselves as inhabitants of states aspiring to NATO and EU membership.

Other countries, ruled by clan capitalists loyal to Moscow, remained safe in Russia's orbit during the 1990's. Ukraine and Georgia were among these, until their regimes were toppled by the 'colour revolutions' of 2003/4. Consequently, Russia faced the prospect of more of its 'near abroad' falling under Western influence. The pain of this was felt most keenly in regard to Ukraine, 17% of whose 49 million population is ethnically Russian, and whose naval base at Sevastopol in the Crimea, hosts Russia's Black Sea Fleet. Ukraine's desire to join both the EU and NATO is particularly irksome for Russia.

More sinisterly, Vladimir Putin confided to Western leaders recently that he did not regard Ukraine as a real country. He is far from the only Russian to hold this view. Both Russia and Ukraine trace their origins to ancient 'Rus,' which was based around the city of Kiev (Kyiv in Ukrainian), the capital city of Ukraine. This is not so much shared history as history that is disputed. 'Rus' was the Russia that was conquered by the Mongol horde in the thirteenth century. Those Russians who hold this view of Ukraine as a non-country do not accept that Ukrainians are ethnically distinct from Russians. Furthermore, they say that the Ukrainian language is little more than a local Russian dialect.

The Kremlin never reconciled itself to the 'Orange Revolution' in Ukraine, and various developments in internal Russian political life since, look like a desire to make sure the same was not repeated in Russia. Consider:

1. The creation of a Kremlin-backed youth movement called '*Nashi*,' (meaning 'ours').
2. The shift in the electoral landscape to make sure that Vladimir Putin's '*United Russia*' Party came top of the polls in elections, along with the demonisation of opposition politicians. Gary Kasparov, the former chess champion, and now opposition leader has, for instance been depicted as a prostitute at Nashi youth camps.
3. The development of the ideological framework known as '*Sovereign Democracy*.' This was based on the assumption that most democratic countries are not truly 'democratic' in the sense of being able to determine their own destiny. They are subject to forces beyond their borders and therefore beyond their control. Russia, however, could and should choose a different path. This was the intellectual basis of the political system created by President Putin.

In a nutshell, all these developments ran along the same theme: shore up the fortress and beat the siege. This was seen as the surest defence against the 'colour revolutions' on its fringes. Regarding Georgia, Russian leaders have also questioned why a country that received millions of dollars of aid in the 1990's from Russia, should now be looking to the West, which according to one commentator, gave Georgia hardly a bean during the same period.

Just as irksome for Russia as the drift of its 'near abroad' towards the West, is the United States' current plan to station anti-missile defences in Poland and the Czech Republic. The stated aim of these is to protect against nuclear missiles launched by rogue states or terrorist groups. But the symbolism of US military systems being placed in former Warsaw Pact countries is not lost on the Russian mind, even if the supposed threat to Russian defences is wildly overstated. I personally don't believe the case for this missile shield has been made, and the proposed sites just seem like needless provocation. The so-called War on Terror also played on Russian encirclement sensitivities, with a number of poor Central Asian countries seeking to avail themselves of US largesse in return for bases for the battle against the Taliban in Afghanistan.

Russia's fear of encirclement is real, but it is also to some extent manufactured for domestic consumption, since the state needs enemies to justify itself. Russia's campaign in Georgia may well have roots in a desire to see a hawkish president installed in the White House in January 2009. That would certainly have fed the besieged fortress narrative. But it has not happened. And the extent to which ordinary Russians are buying this siege narrative is also not certain.

#### ***What Goes Around Comes Around?***

The fear that drives Russian foreign policy is, however, potentially self-defeating. True, in August, Russia broke out beyond its borders for the first time since 1991, and was able to consolidate its presence south of the Caucasus mountains. But, as *The Economist* put it: 'Mr Medvedev's recognition of Abkhazia and South Ossetia may also have unpredictable consequences for Russia's north Caucasus. Russia has bolstered separatism in Georgia but crushed it brutally in Chechnya. Indeed, Russia's recognition of South Ossetia and Abkhazia could easily reignite separatist sentiment in the north Caucasus. Chechnya may be too exhausted to fight another war with Russia at present, but in ten years' time "the question of independence of Chechnya will arise again," says Ekaterina Sokiryanskaya of 'Memorial,' a human-rights group. Russia maintains stability in the Caucasus by military force and fear. Even as Russia was "liberating" South Ossetia, its security services were intimidating human-rights activists in Ingushetia and Dagestan. The methods they use differ little from those of the separatists and terrorists they are fighting. Inevitably, this leads to further radicalisation of the population,' says Magomet Mutsolgov, a human-rights activist in Ingushetia.

And Ingushetia right now is fearfully unstable: a failed state with 70% unemployment in a population of 300,000, where the gun rules, corruption is rife, kidnappings are common, and where the security situation is so tender that secret police officers now routinely travel on the buses. Although only a sliver of land on Russia's southern fringe, its predicament directly concerns Moscow, since its current, but increasingly unpopular president, Murat Zyazikov, was appointed by Vladimir Putin when he was Russian President. The Kremlin can remove Zyazikov or keep him, but whichever path it takes is fraught with uncertainty. Russia's 6-day campaign in Georgia may well have rewarded it with a presence south of the Caucasian mountains for the first time since the Soviet period. But it has plenty to worry about on its own side of those same mountains, for in compromising Georgian territorial integrity, it may inadvertently have compromised its own. And in the Caucasus, arms are easily taken for lesser causes than this.

#### ***Fear Without***

Fear also abounds in Western approaches to Russia. Among countries of Russia's 'near abroad,' such as the Baltic states, Ukraine and Georgia, NATO and EU membership is seen as a shield against what they see as Russian expansionism. The Baltic states joined when Russia was in a place of weakness; now that Russia is strong - a fact which owes much more to its oil and gas receipts than to general social and economic development - Ukraine and Georgia are

hammering on the doors to get in. For countries of the 'old Europe,' such as Germany, now heavily dependent on Russian gas, the fear of upsetting Russia runs deep. You don't pick a fight with someone who can turn the taps off, as happened to Ukraine in 2005 and to Belarus a year later. Energy security is now high on the agenda of Western (especially European) policymakers, as is the security of the Baku-Tbilisi-Ceyhan pipeline. This is the only oil pipeline delivering to the West which does not pass through Russian territory. Though not under Russian control, this pipeline is within striking distance of Russian forces in the Caucasus. It would be easy for Russia to take this out if it so chose.

### ***What Now?***

Complex and distant as the current conflict in the Caucasus seems to be, it raises far-reaching questions for the future of East-West relations, not all of which have been explored here. But as long as the mutual fear and mistrust of the Caucasian peoples finds expression in the wider geo-political sphere, these tensions will occupy the minds of many countries for some time to come. But talk of 'punishing' Russia for its actions in the Caucasus is not conducive to the development of peaceful relations. The fear Russia feels cannot be addressed using the language of punishment. Nor can we berate Russia's unilateralism here without a backward look at the US/British intervention in Iraq in 2003. This was seen by many - including in Russia - as both unilateral and unlawful. Just as unhelpful is the condescending language of former colonial powers like Britain in their dealings with Russia. Lecturing to Russia's leadership, as British Prime Minister Gordon Brown did recently, that "With rights come responsibilities," does nothing for the tone of the relationship. In fact, it is just one more example of the crass political parlance that is used far too often in Britain's dealings with Russia, and it is worse than unhelpful. Russia's cussedness is at least partly a response to what it sees as being told by others how to live.

Unless policymakers and opinion-formers move on from posturing and engage with Russia's fear of encirclement, we will not find in Russia a willing partner on issues of mutual interest. In short, Russia's fear of encirclement is not just Russia's problem. Russia also could make some moves that would improve its standing in world eyes. With its vast reserves of natural resources and human skillbase - especially in heavy engineering - it could be a major force for good well beyond its borders. Its agricultural sector, though much in need of modernisation, has massive potential to help plug the world food gap.

Nor should we forget that back in the Caucasus, there are a large number of people-groups nursing the wounds of centuries of conflict and domination by others. This is where this article started, and where we will soon end. Their problems, like their ways of meting out 'justice,' are more local, and ultimately personal. And in common with every other culture, their issues will not be addressed through bombs and bullets, but through serving hands and soft faces - the church articulating the language of God's presence and love in the midst of trouble. Churches on both sides of the conflict have, sadly, tended to support the actions of their respective governments, but there are reasons for hope. On October 6<sup>th</sup>, 2008, the Holy Synod of the Russian Orthodox Church voted to accept the territorial integrity of the Georgian Orthodox Church, thus rebuffing attempts by Abkhaz and Ossetian Orthodox to come under its jurisdiction rather than that of the Georgian church. The motives for this may have been political, and what it will mean in practice remains to be seen. Also in October, representatives of the Russian and Georgian Baptist Churches, including my colleague here, met in Kiev to pursue reconciliation, one significant result of which was to issue a joint statement condemning the war as 'pointless and brutal.' According to Associated Baptist Press, the statement also said: 'We agree to fully recognise each other's churches in their integrity and take bold steps to understand each other and respect each other's experience.' It further called on people of faith to 'facilitate the process of forgiveness and reconciliation between our peoples.' Such statements of unity will require bold steps by people and churches on the ground if they are to become living reality, in this most beautiful, yet most blood-soaked region of our world. The world waits, and it is for the church to make its move.

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### ***A Post-Script***

Would Russia have acted the same way in Georgia in December 2008 as it did in August of that year? Definitive answers to hypothetical questions are impossible to arrive at, but the question is worth asking, since Russia is in a profoundly different situation economically, and to a lesser extent, politically, from the one it enjoyed earlier in the year. This will be the subject of a forthcoming paper.

Gareth Davies  
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